

Sunday, July 9, 2017

“But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city.” (Hebrews 11:16)

This last week, America celebrated her 241st Independence Day. This marks 241 years of this country exponentially increasing in her pride, idolatry and rebellion against God. Despite this nation’s self-adulation, remember that in the sight of God, it is less than nothing:

“All nations before him *are* as nothing; and they are counted to him less than nothing, and vanity.” (Isaiah 40:17)

From our viewpoint, though, this is where God has put us as pilgrims, strangers, and sojourners, so we should be thankful for whatever blessings we have received. And, of course, we should stay as far away as possible from the pride, idolatry and rebellion of this country.

The festivities surrounding July 4th shine a bright spotlight on the fact that America effectively has a state religion that consists of worshipping flags, worshipping the military, and worshipping themselves. It’s there every day, but we get a good reminder on national holidays like Independence Day.

There’s no denying the idolatry - we have all seen it firsthand. They are “mad upon their idols” (Jeremiah 50:38), meaning that they are boastful or proud of their idols, they praise their idols, they glory in their idols, and they act the part of fools or madmen when it comes to their idols. We have seen this, have we not? It is on par with the worship of Diana of the Ephesians that we read about in Acts 19. After Paul informed them that their idols were not actually gods, they became unglued.

“And when they heard *these sayings*, they were full of wrath, and cried out, saying, Great *is* Diana of the Ephesians...all with one voice about the space of two hours cried out, Great *is* Diana of the Ephesians.” (Acts 19:28,34)

Substitute “USA!” for “Great is Diana of the Ephesians!” and you know what I’m talking about. They take this stuff very seriously. People who otherwise appear to be normal, reserved and sane, become uncontrollable madmen when it comes to their idols. If someone blasphemes God in this country, that’s OK...but if someone does not bow down and worship the flag, all hell breaks loose.

The flag is looked upon as sacred by a huge number of people in this country. In a dissenting opinion in the Texas v. Johnson flag burning case that went before the Supreme Court, Chief Justice Rehnquist said, “Millions and millions of Americans regard it with an almost mystical reverence.” Likewise, if you have been in the military, you are looked upon as being beyond reproach. When I say that this country has turned this into a religion, I’m not joking. I’ll give you a few examples.

Title 4, Chapter 1, of the United States Code (federal law) defines the rules surrounding the country’s flag. It provides instructions for pledging to it, saluting it, displaying it, respecting it, raising it, lowering it, etc. For example:

- Displaying it in a church: “the flag of the United States of America should hold the position of superior prominence... in the position of honor.”
- “The flag should not be dipped to any person or thing.”
- “The flag should never touch anything beneath it, such as the ground, the floor, water, or merchandise.”
- “The flag represents a living country and is itself considered a living thing.”

This reminds me of the following verse:

“They that make a graven image *are* all of them vanity; and their delectable things shall not profit; and they *are* their own witnesses; they see not, nor know; that they may be ashamed.” (Isaiah 44:9)

We are taught to stand at attention, remove our hats, and place our right hands upon our hearts, while we stare at the flag and either pledge our allegiance to it, or gaze upon it while we listen to someone sing about it. School children have this hammered into their brains. This is idolatry, plain and simple.

This country intermingles references to God and heaven along with their idolatry. For example, “One Nation under God” (in the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag) and “In God we trust” (our national motto) sit side-by-side “The Star-Spangled Banner” (our national anthem) and “The Stars And Stripes Forever” (our national march). This is what Elijah warned the people about at Mount Carmel:

“And Elijah came unto all the people, and said, How long halt ye between two opinions? if the LORD *be* God, follow him: but if Baal, *then* follow him. And the people answered him not a word.” (1 Kings 18:21)

And this is how the nations during the Assyrian exile are described:

“So they feared the LORD, and made unto themselves of the lowest of them priests of the high places, which sacrificed for them in the houses of the high places. They feared the LORD, and served their own gods, after the manner of the nations whom they carried away from thence.” (2 Kings 17:32-33)

That is, they give lip service to God and do some outward show of fearing Him, but you can't really worship God and idols. You can't have two masters.

As far as military idolatry, it doesn't get much more repulsive than the Marine Hymn, the oldest song associated with the country's armed forces. Note that it's called a "Hymn" – a song of praise and worship. After a few stanzas of unadulterated pride, it ends like this:

*If the Army and the Navy
Ever look on Heaven's scenes,
They will find the streets are guarded
By United States Marines.*

Really? As if one of the ways to get into heaven is by being a Marine. And as if God needs the help of the United States military to keep heaven safe. The arrogance is breathtaking.

But there are a lot of people who put the US military at or above God. Kind of like how the flag is to be subservient to no person and no thing. We interact with these types of people on a regular basis. Here are a few snippets from some emails we've recently received:

- "Let me explain something to you. It is the veteran, not God, who gives you the ability to protest."
- "You only exist because of the many brave men and women that fought for your rights."
- "I find that freedom rings true and with power that supersedes even that of God...give honor to a fallen soldier who has fought for your freedom."

These pitiful people have only this country. It's all idolatry. It's all vanity. They have no future hope and nothing to look forward to except hell. So let us not fall into this same trap of having inordinate affection for the world. Remember that idolatry can take many forms. Any time you exalt any thing or person above God, it is idolatry - whether flag or military or country, or whatever your particular idol happens to be. Don't think that because you don't participate in

worshipping the flag that you are safe from idolatry. Our affections should not be on this world, but on the better, heavenly city and country to come, whose builder and maker is God. The main texts that I'm going to focus on today are:

“By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as *in* a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise: For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker *is* God... These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of *them*, and embraced *them*, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country. And truly, if they had been mindful of that *country* from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. But now they desire a better *country*, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city.”
(Hebrews 11:9-10, 13-16)

“Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, To an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you, Who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.” (1 Peter 1:3-5)

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were sojourners, strangers and pilgrims. It means to abide as a stranger. It means to be a foreigner, as opposed to a citizen. So we see Peter writing to the elect of God, beseeching them as strangers and pilgrims to “abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul” (1 Peter 2:11) and to “pass the time of your sojourning here in fear” (1 Peter 1:17).

We also have an interesting passage over in Philippians that goes like this:

“For our conversation is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself.”
(Philippians 3:20-21)

The word “conversation” in that passage means “citizenship.” We are citizens of heaven, my friends. Even today we are citizens of heaven. We are governed by the laws of heaven. Our sovereign King is in heaven. Our affections are set on heaven (Colossians 3:2). Our heart is where our treasure is in heaven (Matthew 6:21). And we should behave ourselves as citizens of heaven while we are sojourning on earth.

Abraham and those other patriarchs weren't just strangers and pilgrims – they **confessed** that they were strangers and pilgrims. “Confess” in this context means to avow, or to declare publicly and openly. It is talking about declaring our faith publicly, and that our interest is not in this world, but in the world to come. It is talking about openly renouncing all other things besides Christ. By confessing openly that they were strangers and pilgrims, they declared plainly that they seek a country. To “declare plainly” means to make it manifest and evident before everyone. This wasn't something that was done in a corner. And what was declared plainly? “That they seek a country.” To “seek” in this passage means to diligently enquire after, or seek with diligence. By confessing that they were pilgrims, they were openly and plainly declaring that they were diligently seeking another country, that is, heaven.

It is also said that they “desire a better country.” “Desire” here has the idea with it of an **earnest** desire or a **vehement** desire. It includes a sense of being unsatisfied with what we have on earth, an understanding of the excellence of the thing desired, and an understanding of the means to attain it. Now, note that when I say being unsatisfied with what we have on earth, I don't mean to say that we are unthankful with what we have on earth. Rather, it is a recognition of how much better heaven is, and a desire to have the satisfaction of being in the presence of God.

Their desire was **not** for this world. Our text says, “if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned.” To be “mindful” means to remember it with an inordinate desire after it. Similar to the desire of Lot's wife after Sodom. It is very common among men to desire and love their own country. This desire, however, was mortified in Abraham and others. No enjoyments, blood relations, difficulties faced, etc., could kindle in them a love or a desire after that original country. They simply were not mindful of it.

It is the nature of faith not just to mortify sinful lusts, but to mortify even natural, innocent affections, if they stand in the way of serving God. For many people, this is where the principal trial of their faith lies. Their lives, fathers, mothers, wives, husbands, brothers, sisters, sons, daughters, houses, possessions, country, etc. – there is nothing inherently wrong with having affection for those things. But when they hinder us from serving God, and when they turn into idolatry, not only will our faith mortify them, but we will have a comparative hatred of them (see Matthew 10:37, Luke 14:26, and John 12:25). When we fix our minds on spiritual and heavenly things, it will keep us from inordinately cleaving to those things on earth which, though they be innocent in and of themselves, become sinful to us when they take us away from God.

Abraham and the patriarchs knew that their portion did not lie in earthly things. They lived in faith, and they died in faith. They knew that they had an eternal inheritance waiting for them, so they “looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God.”

When we talk about this heavenly city and country, we are talking about the full reward that God has prepared for us in heaven. The expectation of it was sufficient to encourage, support and refresh Abraham and all the other patriarchs in the midst of all their trials as they sojourned. This heavenly city has foundations, its builder and maker is God, and it is prepared for us.

It has **eternal** foundations, as opposed to the cities of this world. This world’s cities are physically founded on stone, brick, mortar, concrete, steel, etc., and are subject to decay, destruction, and ruin. They are only temporary. This is self-evident – all you have to do is look around. There are once-great cities that now sit in ruins, and cities are currently being destroyed. The infrastructure is falling apart. Streets and bridges are crumbling. Dams are breaking. Drinking water is being contaminated. Overwhelmed wastewater systems spew raw sewage into city streets. Cities in this world are founded on corrupt political systems and ideals, and ruled by sinful, corrupt humans. Cities are founded to enable humans to pursue their love of money, to aid in warfare, to worship false gods, to make sinning convenient. They are full of violence and debauchery. And the list goes on.

Not so in heaven. Heaven’s foundations are the power, wisdom and eternal decrees of God, which will never fade, and can never be thwarted or destroyed. The builder and maker of this city is God. He is the great architect who drew up the plans, as it were, and then by a word, caused it to be created.

He has prepared this heavenly city for us to be perfectly fitting and suitable to be our eternal habitation, and this was done from the foundation of the world:

“Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world:” (Matthew 25:34)

This preparation of heaven for us is evidence of God not being ashamed to be called our God. The reference is back to Exodus 3:6 and many other places, where God refers to Himself as, “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” It is one of our greatest honors and privileges for God to call Himself our God. He is named as the God of each of His elect, individually. God, the creator of the universe and everything in it, has chosen to be known as our God. It is a condescension of God to even look upon the things that are in heaven and earth (Psalm 113:5-6), and yet He will be known as our God. Despite all the reproaches and

contempt of the world, He is not ashamed to be called our God. And not only is He not ashamed, He has taken the title for His own honor and glory. How does that glorify God? Because it glorifies His grace and mercy, and His eternal decrees regarding our election, redemption, sanctification, and glorification. We will be a crown of glory and a royal diadem in His hands (Isaiah 62:3).

This city is our inheritance, which Peter describes as “incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you.” (1 Peter 1:4). These words tell us about the nature of the inheritance, and the security that we have in one day enjoying it. It is incorruptible, undefiled, and unfading – this is the nature of it. These words all point to the idea that heaven is a permanent, flawless thing, but each word teaches us about a different nuance of that general idea.

It is “incorruptible,” meaning that there is nothing in its own nature that could lead to its undoing. Earthly cities, as described above, are corruptible. By their very nature, they will eventually decay and dissolve. Heaven is not made of corruptible materials, but of spiritual things, like everlasting peace, joy, love, and happiness, which have an inexhaustible and perfect source. The blessings that we receive in heaven arise out of us being the beneficiaries of God’s everlasting love, being perfectly conformed to His image, and having eternal fellowship with God. Those things will never corrupt.

It is “undefiled.” There is no external thing that can taint it. On earth, no matter how good something is, there is always something missing or wrong with it. Everything we do or think is defiled by sin. In heaven, “there shall in no wise enter into it any thing that defileth, neither *whatsoever* worketh abomination, or *maketh* a lie” (Revelation 21:27). There will be knowledge without error. Holiness without sin. Love without malignity. Peace without strife. Joy without envy. Happiness without hatred. Spiritual riches without covetousness. Honor without pride. Nothing can enter heaven to defile it.

It “fadeth not away.” Not only is it everlasting, but it will never cease to give pleasure and happiness to its possessors. Everyone here can probably think of a time where they have seen something so beautiful that it literally took their breath away. But it doesn’t take long for it to fade. I had opportunity several years ago to go to Hawaii. I remember driving around the island, and it seems like at every turn, we came upon something that made me involuntarily gasp because of the beauty. I went scuba diving there and had the same experience under water. After a couple weeks, though, it started to become commonplace. My good friend Chris lived there for several years. He told me that when it was time to leave, on the way to the airport, he didn’t even notice the ocean. In heaven, we see the beauty of God and His attributes, and it is always captivating and awe-inspiring, without ever fading.

I'm sure everyone can also think of one of those split-second moments where you have understood something, where the light came on, or the "aha!" moment, so to speak. However you want to describe that, it's an enjoyable experience to learn something and to come to an understanding of something. But once that moment has passed, it isn't quite as exciting, and the more time that passes, the less and less exciting it is. It is a simple matter of fact that the things on this earth fade, and become common. This doesn't happen in heaven.

I believe that part of this unfading nature of heaven is that God will constantly be expanding our ability to learn, and to experience the joys and happiness of heaven. As He expands our capacity, it is immediately filled, such that we are always perfect (that is, complete) in joy and love and knowledge, relative to our ability to experience and receive joy and love and knowledge.

“But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;) And hath raised *us* up together, and made *us* sit together in heavenly *places* in Christ Jesus: That in the ages to come he might shew the exceeding riches of his grace in *his* kindness toward us through Christ Jesus.” (Ephesians 2:4-7)

This passage says that in the ages to come, He will show us the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us through Christ Jesus. That begins now, while we are on earth, and will continue for all eternity in heaven. Now, as much as our frail brains can grasp it, we have some little understanding of the riches of the grace of God. It is, we know, the whole reason that He predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to Himself: “To the praise of the glory of His grace, wherein He hath made us accepted in the Beloved” (Ephesians 1:6). But we have a very imperfect understanding of this. In heaven, our new bodies, perfect and unhindered by sin, will immediately have a capacity to understand and rejoice, far beyond anything that we can experience now. And in those bodies, we will constantly be learning more and more about the infinite riches of the grace of an infinite God, and it will always be fresh and unfading and glorious.

By way of comparison, let's take a brief look at a relatively small part of creation, and the earthly human knowledge acquisition around that. Human beings have studied such a tiny fraction of the known universe that it is effectively 0%. On our own planet, we have explored and studied approximately 0.4% of the mass of the planet (and that number is probably a gross overestimate). Just considering the surface of earth, oceans comprise about 70%, and we have explored less than 5% of that. So that sets a baseline of just how little humans have actually looked into. When it comes to the study of life, that, of course, is called biology. If you ask the best and brightest biologists how many species of life there are on earth, you will

get an answer that ranges anywhere between 3 million and 1 trillion. And the reason for that disparity is: 1. Nobody can agree on what a “species” actually is (Note: the idea of “species” is a human invention. The Bible, in places like Genesis 1, uses the phrase, “after his kind”). 2. Even if they could agree on a definition of their notion of a “species,” nobody today knows about all the diversity and nuances and variations of life in God’s creation.

Within biology, the study of animal life is called zoology. Within zoology, the study of insects is called entomology. And within entomology, the study of ants is called myrmecology. (Yes, there is an entire field of study devoted to ants). If you ask a myrmecologist how many species of ants there are, you will get an answer of anywhere between 12,000 and 22,000. Many of these myrmecologists will focus on a particular type of ant or ants, and that is what they will spend their career on. They will continue to learn new things about ants for their entire lives, but they won’t have a complete body of knowledge, and the knowledge that they do have will not be fully accurate. Then they’ll die, and they’ll pass their knowledge on to a new generation of myrmecologists who will also spend an entire career on the subject, and who will also die without leaving a complete, accurate body of knowledge behind. And if the Lord tarries for 10,000 years, after 10,000 years, they will still not have a complete, accurate body of knowledge about ants.

Now, don’t get me wrong. Ants are amazing and fascinating, and are worthy of being looked into (“go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise” - Proverbs 6:6). But my point is, if lifetimes are spent studying tiny, finite creatures like ants, imagine the time required to plumb the depths of all the amazing works, attributes, and decrees of an infinite God.

What little knowledge we have of Him now that is beclouded by sin will turn into perfect knowledge in heaven. But we will never attain omniscience, because we will always be finite creatures. Only God is omniscient. But through eternity, our knowledge will be full and complete according to our capacity, it will be clear and distinct, it will be without obscurity, confusion or error, and it will be ever-expanding.

“For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.” (1 Corinthians 13:12)

In the middle of Ephesians, Paul breaks forth with a prayer, as follows:

“For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, That he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man; That Christ may dwell in

your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, May be able to comprehend with all saints what *is* the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God.” (Ephesians 3:14-19)

In this passage, we have an interesting paradox: “to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge.” It seems to indicate a progressive knowledge of the love of Christ. That is, we will have more and more knowledge of it, but will never come to an absolute understanding, because it passes knowledge. We “know the love of Christ” even while we are on earth, but that knowledge will be more perfect in heaven. The mysteries of the gospel and redemption and the love of God for His people are things that the angels in heaven desire to look into (1 Peter 1:12), and I believe that we will continue to learn more and more about it as eternity rolls on.

To add to the unfading joys of heaven, we will be worshipping and serving God, unhindered by sin and the weakness of the flesh. We will sing, and offer up thanksgiving and praise, eternally. On earth, even the most beautiful music loses its luster. Our thanksgiving can become rote. Our praises can become empty. And our love to God can wax cold. But in heaven, those things continue to burn with the utmost fervor, and will only become more joyful as our capacity increases.

Heaven is a place of rest: rest from our works, rest from sin, rest from persecutions, rest from toil, rest from weariness, etc. But it is not a place of idleness and sloth. We will have work to do serving God:

“And there shall be no more curse: but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it; and his servants shall serve him: And they shall see his face; and his name *shall be* in their foreheads.” (Revelation 22:3-4)

I don’t know what all that service will entail, but I know that it will be perfectly satisfying and joyful. And I know that it includes participating in the judgment of wicked men and angels:

“Do ye not know that the saints shall judge the world? and if the world shall be judged by you, are ye unworthy to judge the smallest matters? Know ye not that we shall judge angels? how much more things that pertain to this life?” (1 Corinthians 6:2-3)

“Let the high *praises* of God *be* in their mouth, and a twoedged sword in their hand; To execute vengeance upon the heathen, *and* punishments upon the people; To bind their kings

with chains, and their nobles with fetters of iron; To execute upon them the judgment written: this honour have all his saints. Praise ye the LORD.” (Psalm 149:6-9)

Back to 1 Peter 1, the nature of the inheritance is that it is incorruptible, undefiled, and unfading. The security that we have in one day enjoying that inheritance is that it is “reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (verses 4-5). It is reserved in heaven – it is secured by the power of God, beyond the reach of theft, fraud, violence, moth, disaster, or any other way that a person here on earth could lose an inheritance. And any true Christian is guaranteed to receive the inheritance, because they are kept by the power of God through faith. He chose us, He called us, and He will keep us. Most people like to believe in some form of heaven and that they are going to go there, but the vast majority of these people are faithless and living in proud sin. They’d be perfectly happy to go to heaven...so long as God wasn’t there. The reality is, it is only the people who are kept by the power of God through faith, those who are sanctified by the Spirit unto obedience, that will be ensured of receiving the inheritance.

“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any *man* pluck them out of my hand. My Father, which gave *them* me, is greater than all; and no *man* is able to pluck *them* out of my Father's hand.” (John 10:27-29)

**“For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”
(Romans 8:38-39)**

In our text in Hebrews 11, this heavenly city, this great inheritance, is what Abraham, by God-given faith, “looked for” and diligently sought. If he wanted to place his affections on this world, he had plenty of opportunity to do so. Note the stark difference between Abraham and the idolaters in America (and not just in America, but across the whole world). Abraham forsook the world, living here as a stranger and sojourner. He absolutely trusted, was persuaded of, and embraced the promises of God, looking for a better country, that is, an heavenly. His expectation of heaven was the blessed fruit of that trust, and looking for heaven is evidence of faith in any believer. It is the “lively hope” that Peter tells us about (1 Peter 1:3), as opposed to a dead or dying hope. It renews us, it enlivens us, and it will result in us diligently attending to our duties of being obedient to God, and sanctifying and purifying ourselves.

“For which cause we faint not; but though our outward man perish, yet the inward *man* is renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far

more exceeding *and* eternal weight of glory; While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen *are* temporal; but the things which are not seen *are* eternal.” (2 Corinthians 4:16-18)

“Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure.” (1 John 3:2-3)

By nature, every man on earth “has no hope” (Ephesians 2:12). That is, the natural man, who has no interest in the blood of Christ, has no rational reason to hope for heaven. But by making us His children, He has supernaturally given us this lively hope, founded on a most sure foundation. And what is this foundation? Well, it is certainly not in ourselves. It is not because we are less guilty than others, or because our works are more righteous than others. The foundation is His everlasting, sovereign, abundant mercy, which was displayed in all its glory at the cross, when it was joined in perfect consistency with and demonstration of His righteousness, justice, and purity.

And if we believe that, that is, that the Lord has had mercy on us by putting our sins on Christ, then we must consequently have a lively hope of heaven. This is what Abraham believed. This is what caused him to “look for” that heavenly city. This is what guided every step of his life, and it is what carried him on through death.

I love you. Amen.